

RAND Research Brief

Military Recruiting: Trends, Outlook, and Implications

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In 1994, based on some worrisome trends and reports about changes in the recruiting environment, senior officials at the Department of Defense (DoD) expressed concern about DoD's ability to recruit sufficient numbers of high-quality youth (i.e., those who score well on written aptitude exams and have high school diplomas). Recruiting resources had been cut after the Gulf War, and reports circulated that youth had less interest in joining the military. Problems in meeting recruiting goals seemed to confirm this reported decline in interest. The Army Chief of Staff and the Deputy Secretary of Defense asked RAND to first make a quick assessment of the recruiting situation and then carry out a longer-term, in-depth analysis to examine recruiting trends, identify potential problems, and recommend ways to counter them.

The results of this research have been published in several reports produced jointly by the National Defense Research Institute and the Arroyo Center at RAND. The results have also been presented in numerous high-level briefings; the audiences included the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the service secretaries, and other senior civilians and uniformed officers in DoD. The research has had a direct policy impact. For example, briefings in 1994 helped shape decisions by the Office of the Secretary of Defense on recruiting resources. In 1997, the Army made several recruiting changes that were consistent with the recommendations of RAND's longer-term analysis. It increased funding for enlistment incentives, such as the Army College Fund, and for other recruiting resources, such as recruiters and advertising, and it reduced its need for high-quality males without prior service by substituting other kinds of recruits.

INITIAL ASSESSMENT

RAND first examined the supply of potential recruits in spring 1994 and found that the recruiting problems reported at that time were probably not caused by a lack of supply. Econometric analysis and our models relating youth enlistment propensity to potential enlisted supply

showed that the potential supply of recruits was adequate for the accession requirement, which had dropped during the military drawdown. Instead, the problem appeared stem from an increased difficulty in enlisting youth with potential interest in joining the military: the "supply conversion process." These results were confirmed in the longer-term analysis, using updated models and data.

INCREASING ACCESSION REQUIREMENTS

More recent military recruiting problems have been framed by rising personnel requirements. During the drawdown, the services reduced their personnel in part by not replacing one-for-one those leaving the military. But as the drawdown ended, the military had to reinstate one-for-one replacement. Across all services, the planned increase in total accession requirements in 1997 was 18 percent over 1994 levels, with some services having still-higher requirements. The Army, for example, had the largest drawdown and deepest cuts in accessions; the planned increase in 1997 accessions was 45 percent above the 1994 level. Our analysis correctly indicated that this increase, together with changes in the economy, recruiting resources, and recruiter productivity, would lead to serious recruiting difficulties. The Navy experienced similar problems in 1998. Today, avoiding recruiting shortfalls continues to challenge the services.

SUPPLY CONVERSION PROBLEMS

Even before the increase in accession requirements, recruiters were reporting difficulty in meeting goals when the supply of potential recruits should have been adequate. These reports are consistent with our finding that recruiter productivity decreased during the 1990s. What caused these problems? Since the number of interested, qualified youth appeared adequate, two explanations seemed plausible. First, changes in attitudes toward the military could have affected aspects of the supply conversion process, such as recruiters' access to youth in high schools or the counsel that youth receive from parents and

friends about joining the military. Second, changes in recruiting processes or resource allocation during the drawdown could have caused the recruiting system to become less effective in enlisting potential recruits than it was before the drawdown.

Social attitudes toward the military affect enlistments through their effect on propensity—youth's potential interest in joining the military—as well as conversion, the process of actually enlisting the supply of interested youth. During the 1990s, we found some decline in propensity to join the military, but not enough to cause recruiting problems. There was no evidence of change in the attitudes of parents and friends advising youth about military service. Moreover, recruiters reported steady levels of access to youth in high schools. These results indicate that the problems with supply conversion and recruiter effectiveness may be attributable to changes in recruiting processes or resource allocation during the drawdown.

REDUCED CONTACT WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Although recruiters report consistent levels of access to schools during the 1990s, fewer students report contact with a recruiter. There also was a decline in the number of high schools offering the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) and in the number of students taking the test at these schools. Traditionally, these tests are one of the most important sources of leads for recruitment. More generally, historically the high schools have been the most productive market for recruiters. The reduction in contacts and ASVAB tests in high schools are probably interrelated, and may reflect cuts in recruiter billets or other recruiting resources during this period that led to a lower recruiter presence in the schools. Recent difficulties have also pushed recruiters to pursue high school gradu-

ates, or those who can access during the school year, while curtailing their contacts among high school juniors and seniors contemplating their career decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommended a number of actions to solve growing recruiting problems. Given our prediction of a shortfall in meeting the increased accession requirement, one was to increase recruiting resources, specifically by increasing budgets for advertising and educational benefits and by boosting the number of recruiters. Research shows these to be the most cost-effective resources for increasing the supply of high-quality enlistees. Another recommendation was to reduce the requirement for high-quality male accessions without prior service. This can be done by recruiting more women, accepting more prior-service accessions, or by lowering quality goals. Each of these options, however, has limits and costs that must be weighed against the costs of increasing recruiting resources.

In the longer term, we recommended that the services reconsider management issues that could enhance recruiting effectiveness. These include the allocation of resources, the incentives provided to recruiters, and alternative recruit quality levels, including the tradeoff of costs posed by the higher attrition rates for lower-quality recruits and the costs of increasing resources to attract more high-quality recruits. As part of this assessment, the services should also consider additional marketing strategies and enlistment options, particularly for youth interested in college. Success in this expanding market is crucial to the future health of military recruiting. The services have implemented such near- and longer-term changes, some of which are currently being evaluated in ongoing RAND research.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done in RAND's National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the unified commands, and the defense agencies, and in RAND Arroyo Center, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the U.S. Army. This work includes the following documents: Beth Asch and Bruce Orvis, Recent Recruiting Trends and Their Implications: Preliminary Analysis and Recommendations, MR-549-A/OSD, 1994, 33 pp., \$7.50, ISBN: 0-8330-1628-8; Bruce Orvis, Narayan Sastry, and Laurie McDonald, Military Recruiting Outlook: Recent Trends in Enlistment Propensity and Conversion of Potential Supply, MR-677-A/OSD, 1996, 68 pp., \$15, ISBN: 0-8330-2461-2; Carole Oken and Beth Asch, Encouraging Recruiter Achievement: A Recent History of Recruiter Incentive Programs, MR-845-OSD/A, 1997, 111 pp., \$9, ISBN: 0-8330-2552-X; Rebecca Kilburn, Lawrence Hanser, and Jacob Klerman, Estimating AFQT Scores for National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) Respondents, MR-818-OSD/A, 1998, 54 pp., \$10, ISBN: 0-8330-2581-3; Michael Murray and Laurie McDonald, Recent Recruiting Trends and Their Implications for Models of Enlistment Supply, MR-847-OSD/A, 1999, 83 pp., \$15, ISBN: 0-8330-2569-4; Rebecca Kilburn and Jacob Klerman, Enlistment Decisions in the 1990s: Evidence from Individual-Level Data, MR-944-OSD/A, 2000, 108 pp., \$15.00, ISBN: 0-8330-2708-5; and Bruce Orvis and Beth Asch, Military Recruiting: Trends, Outlook, and Implications, MR-902-A/OSD, 2001, 68 pp., \$8.00, ISBN: 0-8330-2874-X. All RAND publications are available from RAND Distribution Services, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138 (Telephone: toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or E-mail: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents are available for review on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). RAND publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve public policy through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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